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Holmes Road: An Exercise in Racial Reconciliation

Jim Howard

The Holmes Road Church of Christ, Memphis, Tennessee, is honored to be invited to contribute to this special issue of *Leaven* a brief history of this church's efforts to be one in Christ.

A couple of qualifiers seem necessary. First, the journey has been so agonizingly slow, and so much remains to be done, that we should by no means be considered the model of "how to do it." Whatever has been accomplished has been, from the beginning, by the grace of God and by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Second, research for this article has surfaced a truth that we had already suspected—namely, that there are other congregations among Churches of Christ (probably many others) that are racially inclusive, some probably much more effective in this enterprise qualitatively and quantitatively than ourselves. Among those of which we have knowledge are the Holmes Road Church of Christ in Lansing, Michigan, and the Clifton Church of Christ in Cincinnati, Ohio. The Ross

Road Church of Christ here in Memphis is rapidly and decisively moving in this direction. We are honored, however, to share our story.

The Holmes Road Church had its beginning May 29, 1959, when nine families from the Whitehaven Church of Christ (located about two miles away) purchased ten acres of land at the intersection of U.S. Highway 51 and Holmes Road, one mile north of the Mississippi state line. The two-story house on the property was replaced with an auditorium, dedicated on May 28, 1961. Four elders were appointed in the spring of 1962. In later years two large classroom buildings were completed, and in 1982 a family life center was added, containing a fellowship hall/gymnasium, as well as reception rooms and additional classrooms.

The congregation has always been theologically moderate. Areas of special interest over the years have been local evangelism, missions, Christian education, and child

care. For about twenty years (until the demographics of south Memphis shifted to a far greater concentration of black families), Memphis Harding Academy operated a Christian elementary school at Holmes Road. In 1967 the church built a children's home, where Christian foster care could be provided. About the same time, a summer day camp was initiated. The church's membership peaked at more than five hundred in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

This is a story of God's blessing the efforts of a number of Christians of loving heart who desired to walk in the steps of Jesus.

But more to the point is the history of the congregation's racial transition—from an exclusively white fellowship before the early 1970s to an inclusive church family consisting of 93 black members and 158 white members today. The church is served by three black and five white elders, as well as five black and six white deacons. This is a story of God's blessing the efforts of a number of Christians of loving heart who desired to walk in the steps of Jesus.

About 1970 a growing concern for outreach into the community led to a busing program aimed at the spiritual needs of the many children who lived in the apartment complexes west of the Holmes Road property. Buses owned by Harding Academy Holmes Road were used on Sundays to bring in growing numbers of children, who were taught about Jesus. The hope that parents would also respond proved frustrating by the mid-1970s. Holmes Road therefore transferred the busing function to a black congregation called the West Shelby Drive Church of Christ (now the Boulevard Church of Christ), which continued that work with greater success.

But that early experience with black children seems to have touched the church's heart. A few blacks began to attend worship services in the early to middle 1970s. The majority of the fellowship warmly welcomed those brothers and sisters. Some members, made uncomfortable by their presence, left. But that was a time of soul-searching,

of prayer for the Lord's will to be done, and of a few important experiences that aided the congregation's spiritual growth.

One of those experiences involved our rather large youth group—all whites except for one black. When the group stopped for worship at a North Mississippi church, the one black teenager was denied entrance. All of the other young people quickly exited the building in sympathy with their comrade.

In the mid-1970s a mixed couple showed up at Holmes Road for Bible school. The black husband was warmly welcomed by the all-men's class, while his white wife was similarly received by an all-women's class. Anxious to meet the visitor's husband, the ladies hurried to the men's classroom and were confused to find no one who seemed to fill the bill. When the truth became known, both husband and wife were warmly accepted, the husband becoming one of the first black members of the church.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ONENESS

What factors came into play from the 1970s to the 1990s, when Holmes Road was featured as Memphis' most racially integrated church (Richard Banks, "Harmony at Holmes Road," *Memphis Magazine*; November 1991)?

A leadership knowledgeable of the issues involved and united in a firm determination to be one people in Christ. In 1970 elders from three Churches of Christ in South Memphis met to ponder the question of whether to stay or leave. While the other two churches decided to move, Holmes Road's shepherds believed that theirs would always be a residential community with people to serve; they decided that Holmes Road would stay. Our black elders, like our other black members, have felt the pain of racial discrimination. The brother of one of our shepherds received national media attention upon initial rejection and then admission by a state university in the early 1960s (he was represented by esteemed civil rights attorney Fred Gray). The wife and young children of the same elder were terrorized when they moved into a white community while he was overseas on military assignment. Another elder was denied the use of a library at a Christian college as he tried to further his biblical knowledge. These men are not naive, yet they are loving and understanding, not bitter, about their experiences. Their beautiful spirit has touched the hearts of their fellow elders.

Some extraordinarily dedicated black Christians who led the way. Surely those dedicated men and women who

came first, some of whom remain faithful members of this fellowship, made the transition easier through their example.

A particularly insightful mindset on the part of the church's elders and ministers with respect to their desire to make the church one body of Christ in practical ways. The shepherds of this flock have consistently resisted the temptation to acquiesce to either black cultural expression or white cultural expression as a means of creating one new culture. The elders believe that the corporate and individual Christian lifestyle transcends any particular culture, and they have led accordingly. They also believe that daily active, loving discipleship is, in the long run, far more productive of oneness in Christ than ongoing verbal reminders from the pulpit. The issue is, however, a regular subject of corporate and private prayer.

The author hopes he has not left the impression that the Holmes Road Church has enjoyed total success in its

efforts toward oneness in Christ. We acknowledge that there remain problems to be solved. We have learned that cultural differences are not easily minimized. We still struggle with differences in worship style, time consciousness, frequency and nature of church social events, and leadership style. As individuals, we also struggle to overcome past racial suspicions and stereotypes. We at Holmes Road are basically a middle-class fellowship; the racial transition here has been made easier because of our essential socioeconomic homogeneity. But so far, we have had little success winning and keeping either the underprivileged or the wealthy. Also, there are other ethnic groups in our city to whom we have not yet reached out. With all of that said, however, we are still thankful for all that the Lord has done among us, and we look forward to the great things that he will continue to accomplish.

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